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Humanitarian assistance and rehabilitation for El Salvador and Guatemala

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report addresses the theme of "humanitarian assistance and rehabilitation for El Salvador and Guatemala". It identifies the lessons learned from the humanitarian response effort and highlights key issues from the ongoing recovery effort in the affected countries. In doing so, it examines successes and challenges specific to the response and recovery effort linked to tropical storm Stan. The report includes a set of observations and recommendations from the Secretary-General to both the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly for further discussion, with a particular focus on improvements to international, regional, national and local response capacity and coordination and on reducing the overall vulnerability of affected populations to disasters.

* A/61/50 and Corr.1.
** E/2006/100.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report was prepared in compliance with General Assembly resolution 60/220 of 22 December 2005 on humanitarian assistance and rehabilitation for El Salvador and Guatemala, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to it, through the Economic and Social Council, at the humanitarian affairs segment of its substantive session of 2006, on the implementation of the resolution and on the progress made in the relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts of the affected countries.

II. Defining the crisis

2. Recurring natural disasters in Guatemala and El Salvador constitute a major cause for reversals in the development gains made by both countries in recent decades, since they increase their levels of vulnerability and lower the resilience of the affected populations. The negative impact of the 2005 hurricane season was particularly pervasive, striking regions that had been repeatedly affected by natural disasters over the previous few years.

A. Guatemala

3. During the first week of October 2005, continuous rains unleashed by tropical storm Stan hit the southern and western coasts of Guatemala, causing landslides and flooding that seriously affected the people in the upper and middle basins, as well as communities along riverbanks.

4. Tropical storm Stan resulted in the loss of 670 lives, 844 missing and 386 injured, affecting an estimated 474,928 people. Its impact was felt by 1,156 communities in 133 municipalities of the 15 regions affected. Some 25,828 housing units were damaged and more than 9,000 destroyed.

5. On 5 October 2005, the Government of Guatemala declared a state of public calamity and called for international assistance. As a result, a United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination team was deployed and an on-site operations centre was set up to support the efforts of the National Coordinating Office for Disaster Reduction, the non-governmental organizations community and the United Nations system. At the request of the Government, the team also installed the Logistics Support System/Humanitarian Supply Management System to improve the management of humanitarian supplies by monitoring the financial flow of emergency donations and investments.

6. The Government, the United Nations system, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, other bilateral, regional and multilateral agencies and international and local non-governmental organizations, coordinated their efforts to reach the affected population. Between 14 and 26 October 2005 an average of 500 shelters were constructed, housing approximately 140,000 people. The effort required the active participation of municipal and provincial authorities, civil society organizations, the United Nations system and Guatemalan Red Cross volunteers. Health-care actions were supported by the deployment of 60 national

health teams, comprising 600 health professionals from several neighbouring and other countries.

7. In order to provide an immediate response to the needs stemming from the disaster, the United Nations system, in coordination with the Guatemalan authorities, launched a flash appeal for $24 million on 10 October 2005. The appeal was intended to address four main needs: health; water and sanitation; food security; and shelter/social infrastructure.

8. Early in the process, a recovery support team was deployed with a view to assisting the Government and the United Nations system in formulating an early recovery framework that would focus on the most vulnerable segments of the population and on restoring their livelihoods.

9. Tropical storm Stan mainly affected the indigenous population and vulnerable groups living in the highlands of Guatemala. Most of the indigenous population live in extreme poverty, and the impact of the storm only served to worsen their living conditions. The remote indigenous communities were also cut off from the rest of the country for weeks after mud slides destroyed roads and overflowing rivers washed away dozens of bridges. The disaster affected men and women differently. Owing to high male migration patterns in the affected areas, most households are headed by women, rendering them highly vulnerable during a crisis period.

10. Six months after the disaster the response continues to focus on humanitarian needs and early recovery priorities. It is expected that over the next few months there will still be pockets of population in need of food aid, given the widespread loss of food reserves suffered by current and previous harvests. Food aid efforts will therefore be complemented by rehabilitation activities that will require technical and financial support for the subsequent implementation of an effective reconstruction plan.

11. The economic impact of the disaster has been estimated at $983 million, 59 per cent of which in the private sector. Total losses represent 3.4 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) at 2004 rates. Loss of soil due to landslides and new crevices created on steep slopes have not only aggravated pre-existing environmental fragility but also increased risk. Any new events could result in further damage and losses, reduce welfare, and postpone the achievement of faster growth and the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

B. El Salvador

12. In the first weeks of October 2005, El Salvador was hit by two simultaneous disasters: the eruption of the Ilamatepec volcano and tropical storm Stan. The Government and Congress of El Salvador declared a state of public calamity and disaster and issued a call for international assistance. The Ilamatepec volcano, located in the coffee-growing area of Santa Ana, first erupted on 1 October 2005, then again on 3 October. On 2 October, a tropical depression developed into tropical storm Stan, one of the 27 named storms of the 2005 hurricane season. The intense rains affected almost half of El Salvador's territory, causing floods and landslides that adversely affected the population and infrastructure, including communications.

13. Sixty-nine people were killed and more than 70,000 had to be evacuated to temporary shelters. In addition, much farmland and many homes were destroyed, while family belongings and small livestock were lost in large numbers.

14. According to an assessment conducted by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), from 26 October to 8 November 2005, the economic impact of the two disasters amounted to $355.6 million, equivalent to 2.2 per cent of the total GDP for 2004. The impact was concentrated in the social, infrastructure and production sectors. The housing sector was the most severely affected ($113 million), with private producers suffering the biggest income losses. As in the case of Guatemala, environmental damage led to a loss of assets that will adversely postpone growth and negatively affect the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

15. At the request of the Government, the United Nations system in El Salvador responded with immediate relief assistance by providing food, shelter, water and emergency health-care services to more than 650 shelters nationwide, and established links with the national authorities responsible for emergency management activities. A United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination team deployed and worked in collaboration with national and local institutions during the initial needs and damage assessment. In response to the emergency, the United Nations launched a joint flash appeal for $7.9 million on 7 October 2005, calling upon the international community to immediately respond to the needs of the affected population.

16. Six months after the disaster, the majority of the people evacuated have returned to their homes and are resuming normal activities in their communities, rehabilitating their homes and preparing the land for the new farming cycle. Unfortunately, more than 100 people remain in temporary shelters, as they cannot return to their homes, which are located in areas prone to volcanic activity. Furthermore, since intense rains are forecast for the next rainy season, the population living in vulnerable zones could once again be exposed to risk.

III. Response and recovery: challenges and lessons learned

A. Capacity for response and recovery

17. Tropical storm Stan tested the response capacity of Governments and the international and local agencies in both countries. In Guatemala, the Government provided immediate assistance to the affected population, mobilized available human and logistical resources to facilitate access to the hardest-hit areas, provided medical services, set up warehouses and distributed humanitarian aid. The contribution made by civil society during the response phase was very important in providing information and facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid to the affected population. The United Nations system was able to implement immediate response actions by shifting resources from programmes to address emergency needs.

18. Similarly, the national emergency system in El Salvador, responsible for managing emergency and disaster situations, was able to reorient budgetary resources of Government institutions to fund the immediate response. Human,

financial and logistics resources were used in partnership with the Government, the private sector, non-governmental organizations and international cooperation agencies and organizations to support relief activities and for prompt restoration of social and road infrastructure destroyed by floods and landslides. Despite the sustained efforts shown by all actors involved, the magnitude of the disasters in both countries exceeded the financial and organizational capacity of their Governments and highlighted weaknesses in the emergency and response plans of both the Government and the United Nations system agencies, as well as in early warning and community preparedness of populations at risk.

Lessons learned

19. Tropical storm Stan left compelling evidence that efforts in the field of community-based early warning and preparedness, especially for those areas at the highest risk, must be stepped up and made an integral part of any recovery, reconstruction and development plan. A more appropriate response should include: the pre-positioning of contingency stocks, especially in the most disaster-prone areas; planning for alternative logistics routes for access to such areas; updating agreements and protocols to facilitate the use of stocks in the event of a new emergency; and continuous updating of logistic and procurement information to ensure the most effective response.

20. The disaster also demonstrated that when local governments and decentralized institutions possess good organizational capacity and are provided with the tools and resources required to support risk-reduction activities, response and recovery becomes swifter and more efficient and human and material losses are reduced. Local organizational capacity must therefore be maintained and enhanced.

B. Coordination and coherence of response and recovery

21. The impact of the 2005 hurricane season revealed the need to better harmonize and coordinate preparedness and response protocols among government agencies, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations, as well as to ensure the participation of specialized personnel in response, recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction processes. Coordinating an effective and efficient humanitarian response becomes more difficult in decentralized contexts, where organized civil society is an important player at the local level.

22. In Guatemala, although an inter-agency programme carried out two emergency food security needs assessments for initial and improved targeting and drawing of possible scenarios for the post-emergency phase, certain initial limitations became evident in the effort to link the central-level structures with local and community organizations and to establish links with other local actors, such as non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations. Existing coordination mechanisms and systems were ineffective in mobilizing the numerous actors at the grass-roots and civil society level, a fundamental aspect of support in relief and recovery operations. In some cases, this generated confusion in roles and responsibilities and led to an overlap of functions, both at the central and local levels.

23. From the onset of the emergency, United Nations entities in El Salvador established effective coordination with emergency management and other relevant Government bodies, including the Ministry of the Interior and the National Emergency Committee. A permanent liaison at the emergency operations centre was established, facilitating the flow of information and the convening of meetings with donors and international cooperation agencies, non-governmental organizations and Government institutions and supporting the establishment of coordination channels with countries and humanitarian organizations for the reception of international humanitarian assistance. In addition, the Ministry of Health set up its command centre and situation room to monitor the health situation and to ensure a coordinated response to support the national coordination mechanism. Upon the request of the Government, the United Nations supported the deployment of an ECLAC mission to assess the health and socio-economic impact of the disaster under the coordination of the El Salvador Government. The role of the mission comprising experts from United Nations agencies, the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration, was to identify possible funding sources to cover reconstruction costs. At the community level, effective delivery of humanitarian assistance was undertaken by United Nations system agencies in collaboration with local governments, national and international humanitarian agencies, as well as community-based associations that operated in the affected areas.

Lessons learned

24. The joint effort of the Governments of the affected countries, the agencies of the United Nations system and its specialized crisis-related organizations, international cooperation organizations, community associations and leaders contributed to an effective response to the emergency situations, at both the national and local levels.

25. However, existing coordination tools and methods must be enhanced in order to provide a more effective and all-encompassing response together with organized civil society. Prior agreements on information-sharing systems and strategies that respect the dynamics of the various types of organizations are therefore advisable.

C. Mobilization of resources and financial sustainability

26. As the aftermath of the 2005 hurricane season demonstrated, there is still no system in Guatemala and El Salvador that centrally records the financial aid (resources channelled to, inter alia, the Government, the United Nations system, non-governmental organizations, civil society and private companies) received. An El Salvador flash appeal generated $6.5 million from bilateral donors and multilateral organizations. The humanitarian funds provided had an important impact on the well-being of more than 14,000 families, helped to promote the resumption of income-generating activities and strengthened local capacities for the incorporation of risk-reduction measures. The internal financial mechanisms of agencies, which allowed for immediate funding of the response to the emergency, proved to be of great value. However, in the case of some United Nations agencies, there was a shortfall in direct contributions to the victims of tropical storm Stan, thus forcing intervention to be limited to those immediately affected, with no resources to properly engage in recovery activities.

27. In the case of Guatemala, the international donor community has to date contributed $32 million to the flash appeal, of which 64 per cent has been channelled to the United Nations system, 31 per cent to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and international and national non-governmental organizations.

Lessons learned

28. In order to provide for a more systematic recording of financial transactions, improve transparency and accountability and identify critical gaps in funding, it is necessary to provide support to Governments to establish financial tracking systems for recording and monitoring the financial flow of emergency donations and investments.

D. Effective use of military assets

29. The magnitude of the disaster required rapid access to hard-to-reach areas, which led the humanitarian community to rely on the capacity of the military in both countries for direct assistance and logistical support. In Guatemala, the logistics capacity of the military was used in air-land transport activities to channel humanitarian aid. Military facilities were used as storage and operational centres. The heavy machinery of the army was used for clearing and re-conditioning roads, and their communications system was used to complement that of the Ministry of Health.

30. In El Salvador, military transport equipment and logistics were used mainly in rescue and evacuation activities in the remote areas hardest hit by floods and landslides and by the volcanic ash spewed out by the Ilamatepec volcano. The National Emergency Committee coordinated actions with local governments, search and rescue teams and relief organizations. The support provided by the military and the civilian population was both timely and important for providing relief to the victims.

Lessons learned

31. In both countries, coordinated actions between Government agencies and the military forces allowed for a quick, coordinated response without endangering national security or the interests of civil society. Similar stand-by arrangements and standard operating procedures aimed at improving such cooperation could be developed for other disaster-prone countries in the region.

E. Information management

32. Centralized information and follow-up on initial assessments in large-scale disasters remains a challenge to the humanitarian community in its efforts to map the scope of a given emergency. The sheer magnitude of the crisis in Guatemala made it impossible to assess the actual damages and the number of families and communities that had been affected. Likewise, the system for consolidating and centralizing information and its dissemination did not contribute to the establishment of mechanisms to verify the information from initial assessments. The National Coordinating Office for Disaster Reduction, the Secretariat of the National

Economic Planning Council and the United Nations system opened virtual sites for the purpose of sharing information with other actors involved in the emergency. Non-governmental organizations, international organizations and Government agencies have also started exchanging data on the ground, though in an uncoordinated manner.

33. In El Salvador, the United Nations system established an information management network for gathering, analysing and disseminating information related to damage assessment by sectors, situation in emergency shelters and for the provision of humanitarian relief assistance to the population in the most affected areas. The information was disseminated widely and regularly to all sectors involved through a website facilitated by the United Nations (www.emergenciaelsalvador.org) favouring the updating and flow of information.

Lessons learned

34. Information management mechanisms that existed prior to the crisis could be activated swiftly and contribute to improved data exchange. However, such mechanisms still represent the exception on the ground.

35. Information systems that go beyond the relief/response phase and into recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction are essential if risk-reduction efforts are to be included in reconstruction plans.

F. Incorporation of risk-reduction measures in response, recovery and development processes

36. The United Nations system considers risk reduction a cross-cutting exercise, both in the response processes and in the ensuing recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction phases. For instance, ECLAC supported the quantification of the socio-economic impact of tropical storm Stan on both countries, and United Nations agencies provided recovery support teams in the formulation of the recovery framework with a risk-reduction perspective. Additionally, the rehabilitation and reconstruction plan of the Guatemalan Government prioritized physical infrastructure works but has not yet oriented such support to the rehabilitation of the assets of the most affected and vulnerable families.

37. In El Salvador, the United Nations system, in coordination with the National System of Territorial Studies, supports the development of land-use plans aimed at the optimal use of the environment and natural resources for the prevention and mitigation of risks faced by the most vulnerable population. One of the main activities jointly undertaken by the United Nations and the National System is the assessment of damage caused by the 2005 rainy season and the establishment of a vulcanological observatory for monitoring and assessing the hazards posed by the Ilamatepec volcano in Santa Ana. Efforts are being made to strengthen local networks to update information on environmental risks at the national level through the design of instruments to facilitate the registry process. The preparation and updating of municipal and community plans that incorporate risk-reduction aspects has been supported through non-governmental organizations, with a view to increasing the availability of risk maps, recovery plans and improving technical capacity through the training of municipal officers and community leaders.

Lessons learned

38. The joint capacities of United Nations agencies and the Government available either in-country or at headquarters levels, were a key factor in the formulation of recovery and reconstruction plans. Because of the limited time available for the implementation of response activities, it will be necessary early on to promote strategies to incorporate the risk-reduction focus to the reconstruction, rehabilitation and development processes, particularly at the local community level, with special attention to gender and multicultural approaches in disaster response and recovery processes.

IV. Implications for the future and recommendations

Improving response capacity

39. United Nations humanitarian agencies should reaffirm their commitment to supporting Central American Governments, at all levels, in the formulation and implementation of policies, strategies and institutional arrangements for risk identification, early warning, risk preparedness, risk management and vulnerability reduction. The aim should be to empower communities at risk so that lives and livelihoods can be protected in the event of future disasters, with due consideration to gender and multicultural issues.

Coordination of response

40. The United Nations should also continue to assist disaster-affected countries in formulating disaster preparedness and response plans, with clear definitions of roles, responsibilities and communication lines between regional, central and local authorities and communities.

Civil-military relations

41. The United Nations should develop stand-by arrangements and standard operating procedures to improve civil-military coordination in the disaster-prone countries of Central America.

Information management

42. The United Nations should support the Governments of Central America in the establishment of information management systems to inform timely and adequate decision-making in emergency situations. Such systems should include recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction perspectives in order to facilitate reconstruction plans.

Mobilization of resources, financial sustainability and tracking

43. Greater efforts should be made to ensure that resources for supporting the affected population and for response preparedness are mobilized, which could in turn help deal with emergencies arising in future hurricane seasons. The United Nations should also assist Governments in developing systems for timely, efficient and transparent use of funds allocated for emergencies, as well as for coordination with international humanitarian agencies.

Risk reduction

44. Member States should allocate additional resources to the United Nations to enhance its cooperation with the Governments of Central America and their relevant national and local structures, thereby facilitating the formulation of effective, multisectoral national platforms and mechanisms to provide guidance and coordinated risk management activities at the national level, as recommended by the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015. In this process, particular attention should be paid to gender and multicultural considerations.